

The great Pumpkin Purge: Madison County hoping to make use of food waste

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ALTON - As much as 40 percent of all food in the United States is wasted, and Madison County is not immune to that statistic.

According to Madison County Resource Management, as much as 14 percent of landfill space is occupied by this food waste. At least some of that is created by spent pumpkins following Halloween. That excessive waste is why the county organization has moved into the second year of its "Pumpkin Purge," which invites people to bring their Halloween gourds to designated disposal locations after they have lost their luster.

This year, Madison County Resource Management has expanded their program from Alton Middle School, which started last year as its pilot, to Highland Elementary School as well. Pumpkins will be accepted on Nov. 4 from 9-11 a.m.

"We find it particularly appropriate that Illinois is the largest pumpkin producer, and the nutrients will go back to enrich Illinois soil, but this is also a way to educate the community about how to reduce food waste, which leads to increased methane production," Madison County Resource Education Coordinator Eve Drueke said in a Facebook message.

The program was started by Breana Lamb, who noticed a county in Northern Illinois was hosting county-wide pumpkin composting events. After a little research, Drueke said Lamb discovered no such program existed downstate.

Last year's pilot program in Alton had as many as 1,500 pounds of food waste composted from pumpkins, but Drueke said she expects more this year because of the additional Highland location. The wasting pumpkins will be distributed to Belleville through St. Louis Composting.

"The compost is resold through retail and wholesale," Drueke said. "Last year, Senior Services Plus accepted the pumpkins for their garden compost, which helps supply their kitchen. It's a really efficient, positive cycle."

Before they can be composted, however, Drueke warned pumpkins must be free of their Halloween flair, including inorganic components such as candles and stickers.

People bringing their pumpkins for the great purging will be able to partake in hot chocolate, prize drawings and fun games for children, Drueke said, which she added makes it more fun than "yard waste collection."

"Pumpkins are a fun, place-and-seasonally-appropriate item and, given that we host at schools, great for getting children and families involved," she said. "However, a large part of our purpose is to raise awareness and provide solutions regarding all types of food waste.

"I certainly think it's something many towns can implement. You need a pumpkin collection point, a place to take them, a way to get them there and a method of informing the community."

Drueke said if someone misses the purge, but would like to compost their wasted pumpkins, they can contact their yard waste pickup facilities.